

INTEGRATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW JERSEY

HARRY A. STROHL, Ed. D.

for Teachers College

Surely one of the least enviable positions in the United States as of this date must be that of a school administrator in a community which has segregation in its public school system.

The Supreme Court held on May 17, 1954, that segregation is unconstitutional. As a result, school administrators must take steps to eliminate segregation or accede to circumvention of the decision. The latter may well be in opposition to the educational philosophies of the pedagogical South.

The Court's decision came as no surprise to most persons working in the field of intergroup relations. It was abundantly clear that the United States had already tolerated the cancerous social evil of segregation in public schools too long. The existence of segregation was flagrantly opposing our documents and traditions of equality and fair play, to say nothing of the disastrous effect it was having in the field of international relations. Persons of pigmentation throughout the world were, and indeed still are dubious about our sincerity as we attempt to sell democracy abroad. (1) They ask the logical and embarrassing question, "Are you trying to sell us a commodity which has not been accepted by your own people at home?"

The Court in its decision, made use of some interesting studies in the field of intergroup relations. The findings of these studies cannot be ignored in our current society. For example, Cheln, Deutscher, and Cook found that ninety per cent

(1)- Rose, A. & C.- American Divided. p. 164

of the anthropologists of the American Ethnological Society, as well as other specialists in the field of Intergroup Relations who responded to their questionnaire, believed that enforced segregation does have harmful psychological effects on the segregated groups. (2)

The same study held that the group which enforces the segregation may develop feelings of guilt for its violation of the American Creed. In order to compensate for these feelings the white man may be forced to distort ideas and codes of conduct. He may become callous to the feelings of others, and may attempt to compensate for his feelings about others through illusions of superiority or other forms of rationalization. (3)

If we believe in our professed ideals it would seem to follow that segregation and discrimination are contrary to our religious and cultural heritage and must consequently be eliminated.

But are we expecting too rapid a change? Will our haste to eliminate segregation cause a needless set-back in the field of intergroup relations?

It would seem that there are some lessons in the story of integration in New Jersey which might well be of value to the school administrator as he works in compliance with the Supreme Court decision and the Department of Justice mandate; and possibly at variance with the sentiments of his community.

In 1947 elementary school segregation existed in the Southern portion of the state of New Jersey in over forty communities. For the most part it was deliberate and complete, though the techniques or manner of maintaining segregation differed in form such as:

(2)- Marrow, A. J.- Living Without Hate. p. 151

(3)- Ibid. 162.

1. Separate elementary schools, mixed junior and senior highs
2. Separate elementary and junior high schools, mixed senior highs
3. Divided building- one half Negro, one half white
4. Separate classes and teachers for each race in the same plant
5. Separate elementary schools for each race on the same site
6. Separate elementary schools joined by a common auditorium. (4)

In 1955, it may be stated without fear of contradiction that New Jersey has largely "licked" its problems of integration in the public schools. On the surface one might assume that this problem was met and solved in the span of eight years. Such was not the case. Long years of preparation on the part of official agencies and the public preceded the elimination of segregation in the public schools. Let us look at some of the high spots in the New Jersey story to see what can be learned.

New Jersey is considered by most as a Northern state. However the southern section of the state has followed the pattern traditionally associated with the South. New Jersey is a fruitful ground for social research as it has consistently been divided regarding major issues. It is neither traditionally Democratic nor Republican. Dr. Marion T. Wright, as a result of her studies, refers to New Jersey as, "The Georgia of the North". (5) The northern section of Jersey in the past decade has witnessed the struggle to achieve greater adherence to democratic ideals, while the southern section has faced the turmoil of the South as it struggles to adapt itself to democratic concepts and changing economic conditions.

- (4)- Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work in cooperation with the State Department of Institutions and Agencies- The Negro in New Jersey. p. 37.
- (5)- Wright, M. T.- "Extending Civil Rights in New Jersey Through the Division Against Discrimination", Reprinted from the Journal of Negro History, January, 1953 by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc. p. 91.

The full story of the history of civil rights in the state of New Jersey, as well as the development of integration of the public schools has been told elsewhere and the reader may find it profitable to provide himself with the background for a clearer understanding of the means of attaining fuller democracy for the citizens of one state. (6) Our purpose here is to develop the framework for the story of New Jersey in its struggle to eliminate segregation from its public schools.

(6)- Of special assistance to the reader may be the following:

- a. Bustard, Joseph L. - "The New Jersey Story", Journal of Negro Education 21:275-285, Summer, 1952.
- b. Higgs, Florence - Integration Problems of Certain Schools in Mercer County, New Jersey, unpublished Masters Dissertation, Trenton State Teachers College, Trenton, New Jersey, 1951
- c. Jenson, Noma - "Survey of Segregation Practices in the New Jersey School System" - Journal of Negro Education 17:84-88, Winter, 1948
- d. Oak, Eleanor H. - The Development of Separate Education in the State of New Jersey - unpublished Masters dissertation, Howard University, Washington, D. C., 1936.
- e. Strohl, Harry A. - The Elimination of Segregation in the Elementary Schools of Southern New Jersey - unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, N.Y., 1954.
- f. Wright, Marion M. T. - The Education of Negroes in New Jersey Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, N.Y., 1940.
- g. Wright, Marion M. T. - "New Jersey Leads in the Struggle for Educational Integration." - Journal of Educational Sociology, 26:401-417, May, 1953.

As early as 1881, segregation in the public schools was forbidden by statute. The law of 1881 made it a misdemeanor for any board of education member to vote for the exclusion of any person on the grounds of race, religion or nationality. (7) The primary effect of this law was to cause the northern section of the state to take steps to eliminate segregation and to give aggrieved persons throughout the state a statute of clear and definite language which would hold in court. This law did not end segregation- it continued almost unhampered in the southern section of the state probably because of the necessity for the aggrieved person to bring suit.

The New Jersey Civil Rights law stated that all persons within the jurisdiction of the state would be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theatres, and other places of public amusement. This law was amended in the years 1917, 1920 and 1935 to keep it current with the development of the state. (8)

A revitalized program for improvement of rights of minority peoples within the state through legislation and education began in the 1940's. Laws were passed forbidding discrimination in employment. Test cases of segregation in public schools pointed out that the era of ignoring existing statutes was over. Official agencies called the attention of the legislature and the public to existing discriminations. The end result was a provision in the 1947 Constitution which forbade segregation in the public schools. The task of enforcement was given to the Division Against Discrimination which was supported by chief authorities of the state.

(7)-Bustard, J. L. - op. cit. p. 275.

(8)- Annual Report of the Urban Colored Population Commission, 1946, p44.



The Division Against Discrimination began its study of the conditions and extent of segregation in the schools of New Jersey. The DAD moved with dispatch, combining pressure and a spirit of cooperation with all school officials involved. By 1952 most of the administrative and community problems regarding the elimination of segregated schools had been overcome. (9)

Does this sound simple? It wasn't. It took the state of New Jersey from 1881 until 1947 to write and enforce a clear-out policy of anti-segregation in the public schools. Prior to the 1947 provision, ground-work in the field of human relations by Civil Rights Commissions, NAACP, The National Conference of Christians and Jews, and other groups had created a climate of opinion which made the new law acceptable. There had already been a law outlawing discrimination in hiring and firing persons - with an efficient, well-trained staff equipped to enforce such legislation. When the State Department of Education began to work on the problem of eliminating segregation in the schools, the staff of the DAD was already in existence, already skilled, and already known throughout the state. The DAD was capable of accepting this assigned role and completing it with dispatch.

Segregation was not eliminated in only one manner. The following represent the most common means utilized by the forty-five communities which set about to eliminate segregation in their schools.

1. IMMEDIATE and COMPLETE- Over fifty per cent of the communities decided to eliminate segregation all at once rather than by stages. The larger cities, (over 50,000) did not fall into this category, but desegregated gradually.

(9)- For a complete presentation of the DAD methods used in its four to five year program see:

In no case where immediate desegregation was adopted as the method was there conflict or violent opposition. The occasional, unorganized objectors were reasoned with and no exceptions or transfers because of protest were allowed. In every case the protestations ceased. There were occasional, small scale withdrawals to private and parochial schools in some communities (10)

2. TEACHER INTEGRATION ONLY- Only one community utilized this method which integrated the staff but not the children. The community set up a program of no school zones and allowed any child to attend any school where there was room and grade allocations to fit his needs. By and large this has meant that integration has been a slow process for this community but the method does allow for a safety-valve for those persons who are violently opposed to integration. One further requirement for such a method would be that there must be a surplus of room to facilitate transfers. It would seem that any community intending to follow the method of allowing children to attend the school of their choice should first study the program carefully as it may run counter to expressed aims.

3. GRADE LEVEL- It did not seem to make much difference which grade levels were integrated first. Some communities started with the seventh and eighth while others started from kindergarten up. Other factors seem to be more significant than the grade level of initial integration.

4. NOVEL MEANS OF NEGRO TEACHER INTEGRATION- Fourteen communities utilized novel means to attain Negro teacher integration. Some of these methods were: to assign all Negro teachers to one

(10)- For a complete development of methods used and case studies of communities involved see:

Strohl, Harry A.- Op. cit Chapter V and VI.



grade in the city, to assign Negro and white teachers in alternating grades, to assign Negro teachers as substitutes and then as permanent staff members. From material available all these methods did not seem to be of significant importance and most communities dropped the practices during the second year of integration.

5. PUBLIC EDUCATION- As the term is used here it implies a broad and extensive public education program with the expressed desire of involving the public in the integration program. It would seem that if the program is well planned, occurs prior to integration, but after the entire goal is clearly mapped out for the community and that goal is publicized, the possibilities for difficulties are reduced considerably.

Public education after desegregation has been initiated or accomplished serves little purpose in preventing difficulty. It may soothe the troubled waters, though there is little evidence to this effect.

6. MUCH PLANNING- Almost all the communities involved in desegregation in New Jersey did considerable planning. If the planning is made known to the community before integration, if it involves broad representation of the citizenry, after public notice of intent to desegregate, this technique would seem to be significant.

7. USE OF ADMINISTRATORS CHILDREN- In only a few cases did the officials deliberately assign the children of administrative personnel to Negro teachers. Where there is a desire to avoid the charge of favoritism, this may be one means of overcoming the charge though there wasn't sufficient material to give any weight to the technique.

From the above, it can be seen that the manner or technique utilized to achieve integration made little difference. There were other factors which might well be more significant. (11) After considerable research the conclusion reached was that the following factors may well be considered crucial in determining success or failure for an integration program:

1. Intensity of feeling toward Negroes- Where the feeling toward Negroes was intense, it required considerably more planning to achieve integration. Haste was not the pattern in these situations but rather, wise community involvement with representative persons being in on the planning stages.

2. Condition of the existing facilities- In many cities it had been considered acceptable to educate the Negroes in substandard facilities. With integration, the white parents refused to allow their children to attend schools which had been condemned as unfit places for children. It might well be of value to bring all buildings up to par before starting on any program of integration.

3. Attitude of the Board of Education and Superintendent.- This is one of the most important factors in the entire picture. When the superintendent and the board took a straight forward policy and allowed no deviations after they had planned well, there was no trouble. Where there was vacillation, hesitancy, or opposition to integration on the part of either the board or the superintendent, trouble in the forms of protest and dissatisfaction ensued.

4. Attitude of the Negro Staff- In some communities opposition

to integration stemmed from the Negro staff who felt its position in jeopardy or who felt that the field of education for the Negro teacher of the future would be an extremely difficult one to enter due to refusal of boards of education to hire additional Negro personnel. A strong tenure law and the existing teacher shortage made this a groundless fear in the State of New Jersey.

#### SUMMATION

The lessons learned from New Jersey's integration program are clear, and represent the following:

1. New Jersey has a comprehensive law which was supported from the Governor down.
2. An effective agency was already in the field which was capable of enforcing the law and of aiding communities to make the adjustment rapidly, with a minimum of social cost.
3. Administrative officials planned each step carefully, leaving nothing to chance. After five years of integration, the persons who expressed fears of riot, demonstrations, non-compliance, etc.; now regard segregation as a dead issue and state, "It was as easy as falling off a log."
4. A straight-forward action with no deviations brought about less confusion and a healthier adjustment than did a devious course. All complaints were dealt with individually and soon opposition was changed to cooperation as the goal for a better education for all became acceptable to all persons involved.
5. Where superintendents used their authority to assign teachers in accordance with ability and personality the change was made with little antipathy. Teachers now felt they could teach democracy without being in an undemocratic structure. They felt a new challenge and the quality of teaching was vastly improved.

One caution must be cited here. In their enthusiasm to make integration work, some superintendents assigned their best Negro personnel to "all-white" schools. Where residential patterns make for schools of one race this often meant that the experienced teachers were replaced by inexperienced personnel. The children may suffer from such differential assignment policies and it should be avoided. Superintendents who assigned on basis of ability and personality met such slight opposition that it was negligible.

6. All buildings must be brought up to an acceptable standard before integration takes place or opposition will surely result.

7. The school administration must review its hiring policies to assure that only competent personnel will be hired as the additional stresses of integration will surely tell on the incompetent teacher. It may be wise for communities to initiate in-service training programs to equip personnel to cope with the social stresses of integration.

8. If the school system has an inadequate system of grouping its children or of providing for individual differences, cries of anguish may well result from integration. A more careful appraisal of the situation will reveal that the protests are not against integration as such but really are aimed at an inadequate educational program. The increased social pressures of integration will burst weak seams in the educational structure no matter where they appear. For some systems integration will result in a revitalized and more meaningful education program for all.

The New Jersey story represents what is meant by gradualism in its highest sense. No step was made before careful study was completed to assure success. The public was educated by a wide representation of religious, social, and civic agencies. Gradualism means moving forward with thought, not the maintenance of the status quo. The program for the state involved ~~thousands of~~<sup>Many</sup> radio and television programs, countless pieces of literature, and innumerable public addresses by persons of good-will throughout the state. Teachers colleges evaluated their programs through action research so that the new teacher could evaluate himself as well as his training prior to entering an integrated school system.

Projecting the New Jersey story into the nationwide scene represents largely speculation. It would seem that school officials would apply themselves to creating a climate where integration can be secured with as little conflict as possible. Steps have already been taken along this line in the South. For the past few years considerable sums have been expended to equalize the educational opportunities for all children. There has been an attempt to secure better staffs and facilities for the Negro as well as for the white child. As this gap is narrowed, the task will be made so much more simple.

There are many ways to achieve integration. Segregation was eliminated rapidly in some communities, while others required considerable time before the step was completed. The important thing is the goal which must be attained by well-thought out programs of action. Rash action might well set integration back many years and give the enemies of democracy still another

charge to hurl a gainst us in the struggle for the minds of men.

Bustard sums up the story as follows:

While New Jersey cannot furnish any one formula, it can testify that complete integration in the public schools can and will work. It may even be safe to say once more that the way to learn to do a thing is to do it, and in this respect, New Jersey has proven again that the best way to integrate, is to do it. (12)

(12)- Bustard, J. L.- op. cit., p. 265.